

OPINION

With winter coming and the virus spreading, a feeling of dread is setting in

**ANDRÉ PICARD** >

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 5, 2020

UPDATED OCTOBER 6, 2020

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 5, 2020

This article was published more than 6 months ago. Some information in it may no longer be current.

289 COMMENTS ← SHARE — A **A+** TEXT SIZE BOOKMARK



00:00

Voice

1x



A woman relaxes on Montreal's Saint Catherine Street, on Oct. 5, 2020.

PAUL CHIASSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

As the days grow colder and darker, and the daily numbers of coronavirus cases and COVID-19 hospitalization and deaths do the same to our mood, there is a growing sense of dread in Canada, especially in the hard-hit provinces of Quebec and Ontario.

This feels different than when the pandemic first hit in the spring. The virus, which was almost exclusively infecting travellers and their close contacts and killing elders in institutional care, felt like it could be reined in.

And it was, for a while.

New daily cases in Canada, which peaked at more than 2,000 a day in April, gradually dropped to just over a hundred by the end of June. The rules were clear and public took mitigation measures seriously – mask wearing, physical distancing and avoiding large gatherings.

But summer's pleasures beckoned. Bars and restaurants reopened. Families and friends gathered in increasingly large numbers. Stores opened. So did schools. Social bubbles burst. The coronavirus exploited these social interactions to spread.

Now we see new record numbers of cases announced almost daily. Infections are no longer concentrated among easy-to-track group such as travellers or nursing home residents – they're happening more broadly in the community. Not just in big cities such as Montreal and Toronto, but in outlying regions.

Getting the evil genie that is coronavirus back in the bottle is going to be a lot more challenging this time.

Yet, we have a lot more tools in our toolbox to deal with the second wave of infections.

Mask wearing is now the norm, some small, loud anti-mask protests notwithstanding.

We're far better at treating those who are infected, which explains, in part, the lower mortality rate. Demographics has a role too; younger, healthier people are being infected. But we can't be too complacent; the illness progresses slowly so we won't know the impact of the large increase in infections for a few more weeks. Nor do we know how many people will have lingering symptoms.

In the spring, the country struggled to complete 20,000 tests a day. Now we can do four times that number, but the waits and the backlogs are worse than ever.

That can be explained by the one crucial area where we haven't improved: Poor communication remains the Achilles heel of the pandemic response in both Ontario and Quebec.

The messaging around testing has been abysmal. We've gone from "get tested if you travelled" to "get tested if you have symptoms" to "anyone and everyone should get tested" to "you have to make an appointment to get tested." To make matters worse, some schools and workplaces are making their own random rules about who should be tested and how tests should be used.

The most muddled messaging of all however, has been around social gatherings.

The rules are, at best, incoherent.

Ontario still has open bars, restaurants, casinos and gyms, and it allows gatherings of up to 50 in banquet halls. At the same time, it's telling families they should not gather for Thanksgiving dinner. Or maybe that it's okay to do so. Four different officials gave four different answers, none of which were "yes" or "no."

Quebec has closed bars and restaurants again for another month. But it has also struggled to explain where and when people can meet.

After months of urging people to socialize outdoors, it banned outdoor gatherings. Then officials turned around and said, no, you should meet outdoors, but, in small numbers, wearing masks and physically distancing.

What perpetuates confusion is the provinces' refusal to state clearly their goals or the metrics they use to justify new rules.

New York City, for example, said schools would close in neighbourhoods where the rate of positive tests exceeded three per cent. It did and they acted. Quebec, on the other hand, moved some regions into the "red zone" because, well, we're not sure exactly why. Ontario is even worse, making incremental changes that it doesn't seem to be able to explain.

One can't help but feel that nobody is really in charge anymore, and that public policies are being drafted on the backs of napkins.

That, more than anything, is fuelling pandemic dread.

With winter coming and no clear end in sight to coronavirus spread, it feels like the walls are closing in.

The role of politicians and public health officials is to shore up our defences, to keep us vigilant. For a moment, we allowed ourselves to think that everything hadn't changed, that we could easily return to "normal" and now we're paying the price.

In these pandemic times, it's a fine line between preparation and desperation, and only strong leadership can keep us on the right side of that line, away from the abyss.

To hear from André Picard live, [please register](#) for his upcoming webcast, taking place October 16th at 12 p.m. ET

Keep your Opinions sharp and informed. Get the Opinion newsletter. [Sign up today.](#)

© Copyright 2021 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher